DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 338 620 SP 033 455

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TITLE Student Teaching Triads: Perceptions of Participant Roles.
PUB DATE Oct 91
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Northern Rocky Mountain Educational Association (9th, October 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication (Thought Transfer); *Cooperating Teachers; Elementary Education; Higher Education; *Interpretive Skills; *Perspective Taking; Practicum Supervision; Preservice Teacher Education; *Role Perception; Student Responsibility; *Student Teachers; *Student Teacher Supervisors; Teacher Responsibility

ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to determine and examine the understandings and misunderstandings of members of student teaching triads composed of student teachers, cooperating teachers, and university supervisors. These understandings relate to what is perceived to be important in the student teaching experience, and who should be most responsible for each of these areas of import. The purpose of the study was to discover how each individual perceived his or her own role and where areas of agreement or disagreement exist. University supervisors, classroom supervisors, and student teachers (N=517) were asked in a questionnaire to describe their perceptions of role responsibilities and values within the triad. The 396 responses indicated 9 areas of significant perceptual differences according to role. By including comments offered in the questionnaires and follow-up interviews of all triad populations, differences were clarified and suggestions for change discussed. The findings suggest that the student teaching experience is influenced by attitudes of each member of the teaching triad towards each other as they relate to role expectations and responsibilities. (LL)

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Student Teaching Triads:
Perceptions of Participant Roles

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Presented at the Ninth Annual Northern Rocky Mountain Educational Research Association Meeting, October, 1991

Running head: STUDENT TEACHING TRIADS

SP033455

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Abstract

One aspect influencing the success of the student teaching experience could be found in the attitudes of each of the members of the teaching triad toward each other as they relate to role expectations and responsibilities. An attempt was made to determine the differences in perceptions of role responsibilities for the three members involved in the student teaching triad. Five hundred seventeen university supervisors, classroom supervisors and student teachers were asked in a questionnaire their perceptions of role responsibilities and values within the triad. The 396 responses indicated nine areas of significant ($p<.05$) perception differences according to role. By including comments offered in the questionnaires and follow-up interviews of all triad populations, differences were clarified and suggestions for change discussed.

Student Teaching Triads: Perceptions of Roles

In recent years, teacher education institutions in the United States have been called upon to make major changes in the ways preservice teachers are prepared. With the studies of the Holmes Group, NCATE, Carnegie Foundation and others, much is becoming known about what is not satisfactory. Many suggestions have been made concerning the proposed changes, but the debate continues as to how to make this important education satisfactory.

An area of interest to all reform efforts has been that of field experiences and, specifically, student teaching. While many students have stated this to be the most valuable of their coursework, critics have often expressed their fears that the value of such is questionable with the procedures and goals open for debate (Dewey, 1964; Iannaccone & Button, July, 1964; Lortie, 1975; Tabachnick, Popkewitz & Zeichner, 1979-80).

One aspect of possible success or failure of the field experience might be found in the attitudes of each of the members of the teaching triad toward each of the other members of that triad specifically and generally. Preservice teachers enter teacher education with perceptions of the teaching environment based on years of experience as students (Lortie, 1975). Classroom teachers and university supervisors also enter each of their student teaching encounters with their own perceptions and expectations. Perception involves the use of previous knowledge

and experience in order to interpret the environment. The perceptions of all involved concerning their own and the roles of others within the student teaching triad will also affect their interactions within the triad. There is a great deal of concern over whether these perceptions and expectations interfere with the actual growth of a student of education during this portion of the education process (Calderhead & Robinson, 1991; Cochran-Smith, 1991).

Purpose

The purpose of the study reported here was to attempt to determine and examine the understandings and misunderstandings of the three members of the student teaching triad. These understandings relate to what they perceive to be of importance in the student teaching experience and who or what combination of people they each think should be most responsible for each of the areas of import. The purpose was not so much to discover how each perceived his or her own role and those of others in the triad, but where areas of agreement or disagreement exist.

Procedures

Five hundred seventeen (517) questionnaires were administered to the elementary (K-6) level student teachers, classroom supervisors and university supervisors from two universities. The questionnaire given to all populations contained twenty-one descriptors concerning the functions of student teaching. For each descriptor the participants were asked to answer in two ways: (a)

who is to perform the duties described and (b) how important the descriptor is to the supervision of student teachers. In the first set of ratings, participants were given the choices of "university supervisor", "classroom supervisor" and "other" and were allowed to choose more than one party to perform each task. The second portion of the questionnaire used a Likert scale with ratings from "most important" to "most unimportant". Participants were also asked in the questionnaire to make comments and invited on a separate sheet of paper to participate in a follow-up interview.

Results

There were 396 responses to the questionnaire: 36 university supervisors, 219 classroom supervisors, and 137 student teachers. The study indicated that there were nine areas of the twenty-one where significant role perception differences existed. As can be seen in Table 1:

1. There were five areas where the University supervisors and classroom supervisors were in agreement while the student teachers held a different perspective. In each of these areas, the student teachers expressed perceptions that the classroom supervisor should have the dominant role while the university and classroom supervisors perceived more of a shared role between themselves. In all five of these areas, a greater percentage of university supervisors perceived their own role to be of more importance than either of the other groups did.

The descriptors where the student teachers disagreed with the

supervisors were in the areas of who should be responsible for (a) observing the student teacher routinely and reacting to teaching χ^2 = 16.19, C = .120, p = .013; (b) tying theory to practice χ^2 = 46.08, C <.001, p<.001; (c) encouraging the student teacher to adjust to, value, and attempt various teaching styles and strategies χ^2 = 18.34, C = .212, p =.049; (d) helping the student teacher understand how children learn χ^2 = 31.55, C = .002, p =.002; and (e) helping the student teacher think about the work of effective instruction χ^2=23.98, C = .008, p =.008. In all of these areas, the student teacher demonstrated a perspective giving the classroom supervisor a much more dominant role while the two different supervisors were more in agreement that these were shared roles.

2. Role differences also occurred when deciding who should support the classroom teacher in developing a healthy working relationship with the student teacher χ^2 = 44.09, C <.001, p <.001. Again the two supervisors agreed. This role belonged to the university supervisor. The student teachers perceived this as a role shared with others.

3. In the area of who should assist the student teacher in writing and following lesson and unit plans, again a difference of opinion was expressed χ^2 = 25.64, C =.012, p =.012. While the university supervisors and student teachers agreed this was primarily the job of the classroom supervisor, mor classroom supervisors wanted to share the responsibility with the university

supervisor. Only 7% of the total indicated this to be primarily a university supervisor role.

4. The university supervisor showed a fairly strong feeling that they should be the ones to make the final decision that a student teacher is either not prepared to student teach or inappropriately placed and remove him or her from the setting (47%). Only 18% of the classroom supervisors and 21% of the student teachers felt that this should be done solely by the university supervisor. The classroom supervisors indicated favoring a shared role with the university supervisor while some wanted the classroom supervisor to be solely responsible. Only 3% suggested wanting another to make the decision and 7% desired a group effort including others $\chi^2 = 46.01$, $C < .001$, $p < .001$.

5. When helping the student teacher decide what is important to teach, all agreed that this is predominantly the role of the classroom supervisor (77%). Only 3% indicated this to be the role of the university supervisor. The differences of opinion occured in how much the role should be shared $\chi^2 = 26.99$, $C = .008$, $p = .008$.

When asked the importance of the descriptors, all of the populations were consistent in rating job importance high. Again some differences occured between the populations, but the ratings were predominantly "most important" or "important", with all populations having at least 90% who agreed with these ratings.

There were 78 participants who made one or more comments in

the space provided on their surveys. Twenty-one people from all of the triad roles participated in follow-up interviews. The interviews were done with one, two or three from a given role together. Different themes which appeared with some consistency in the comments and interviews were equality and inequality of the roles of the two supervisors, the true role of the university supervisor, the need for early field experiences, length and duration of university supervisor's classroom visits, skills of the student teacher and the match between the student teacher and classroom supervisor. Fifteen commentaries from both supervisory roles expressed the need for equality and team work between the two roles. It was suggested to include the principal on the team, and to also look to other grade-level teachers and support staff as members. It was also expressed that the student teacher and the classroom supervisor must be held equally responsible for the success of the experience. Some from the university supervisor population expressed that their role was only of liaison, advocate, friend and trouble shooter, knowing "when to get out of the way."

One classroom supervisor stated that "interaction...is very critical to the development of the student teacher. The more the better." Another said, "the university supervisor needs to spend more time in the classroom with the student teacher. Often the full emphasis is on the classroom teacher and this places undue burden on an already over-burdened teacher." Three classroom supervisors expressed the need for university supervisors to be

qualified in both supervision skills and classroom experience. "University supervisors also need to be held accountable for how well they are helping/observing the student teachers," and "need to be chosen more carefully." Also "...university supervisors need to be people who will be around for more than a semester." A concern was also expressed by four respondents that the university supervisor writes a recommendation for the student teacher and therefore has an obligation to visit often enough to "get to know you and the way that you teach."

The balance between the two supervisors is stated by a student teacher:

> The classroom supervisor will have the greatest impact on me when I am student teaching. They are there all the time and will see me in many extremes, from best to worst. ...there for me right now, not a phone call or messages away.

Many classroom supervisor and student teacher respondents were concerned about the lack of previous experience by the student teacher, while others expressed that the student teaching experience should be longer. One classroom supervisor stated, "The university should continue to improve supervision prior to student teaching experience and eliminate inappropriately placed students early in their education years." It was also expressed by the classroom supervisor population that it is the university's responsibility to screen students long before student teaching for

basic skills such as spoken and written grammar and spelling.

Agreement was not found in the comments on the length, timing and/or structure of supervision observation. One classroom supervisor suggested that valuable school time should not be used for discussion with the student teacher and that a weekly seminar might be a more appropriate time for such. Others stated that it would be nice to discuss progress every time an observation is made. Many suggested that the time of the observation should be flexible according to student need and progress while a variety of classes should be observed. One classroom supervisor asked for the university supervisor to spend one-half to a whole day with the student teacher while he or she is in charge of the class. These proposals were reiterated by both classroom supervisor and university supervisor populations during the follow-up interviews when asked for the ideal situation of supervision instruction. The emphasis by both populations was two fold: (a) exchanging quantity for quality of school visits by the university, and (b) improving communication between the institutions through either a class in supervision or a seminar in which expectations could be explained and examined.

Two university supervisors and some classroom supervisors lamented that student teaching supervision is not valued enough by the university. One classroom supervisor stated that the university supervisor should have a limited number of student teachers as time is critical, although another classroom supervisor

asked if the university supervisor were just "passing time" or "filling in a duty roster." A student teacher called his or her university supervisor "uninvolved and irrelevant" since he or she so seldom appeared when the student teacher was teaching.

The university supervisor role was not the only one to be criticized in the comments as one student teacher stated.

> I feel I could have used more input from my classroom supervisor. After...I was on my own. I never saw much of her during class time. She said she felt comfortable with my handling it alone, but I liked her suggestions when she would observe.

Another area of concern to all groups was the match between the members of the the triad and the appropriate match of the student teacher to a class level. One classroom supervisor stated, "usually a student teacher fails because he or she has been placed at the wrong grade level or the university supervisor or classroom supervisor hasn't good communication skills." Another expressed that, "teachers should have the opportunity to meet the student teacher before the placement to avoid a personality conflict." One classroom supervisor, interviewed would not take a student teacher without first interviewing him or her. It was suggested by two that interviews similar to when one is seeking a paid position might be of great value.

The final area of concern discussed was the need to pay the classroom supervisor more for supervising. One student teacher

stated that, "once student teaching began, the support system was no longer the university." A classroom supervisor agreed stating that they should be paid "much more for working with student teachers." This was in some ways corroborated during the interviews when members of all groups were asked how to get more qualified teachers to participate in the supervision of student teachers. While the student teachers felt that the classroom supervisor should be paid more, the messages of the classroom supervisor and the university supervisor were that it was not just a money matter. One classroom supervisor had been supervising for many years in many states and often was not reimbursed in any way. The underlying determiner for many classroom supervisor was one of being valued. It was suggested that the universities "get out to the teachers and ask for their help", "offer free credits at the university instead of the small payments often proffered", or alter the ways in which free credits are given.

Discussion

Results from this study indicate that there is a difference of perceptions concerning role responsibilities among the participants in the student teaching triad. Although none of these perceptions are, in themselves, enough to destroy student teaching, many of them do affect the value of the experience for the student and, more importantly, could have a negative effect on the relationship between the university and the public schools. Communication appears to be the primary concern of the classroom supervisors.

This should also be true of the university in this time of severe criticism and change in the schools and the education of teachers.

Although there are differences in role perceptions among the people performing the tasks involved in student teaching, much is considered by all to be better than it has ever been before. The student teachers appear to be the ones with the greatest role perception differences. This could be caused by many factors and might be improved with better communication efforts which include all members of the triad as well as others involved in auxiliary roles.

While many agreed that more field experience was the ideal, disagreement occured concerning when and how this should be implemented. The choice of quality over quantity was overwhelming among those who discussed this issue. This was true whether the discussion was concerning the number of field experiences for preservice teachers or the issues around the supervision of such experiences and student teaching.

If education is to move forward, and survive the critics, all must learn to value what each other has to offer. Students can be taught to be reflective if they are encouraged from a non-critical, truly evaluative base involving both of the supervisors interacting as ones who each appreciates what the other has to offer. School administration and other staff could easily be incorporated into a new vision of the supervision of student teachers. Reform is not easy, but it does not need to be costly.

Table 1

Population Comparisons of Job Descriptions According to Role Within the Triad

	n	Roles						
		1 University	2 Classroom	3 Other	4 1&2	5 1&3	6 2&3	7 1&2&3
Observes student teacher routinely and reacts to teaching								
University supervisor	36	6%	47%		44%			3%
Classroom supervisor	216	4%	39%		56%			2%
Student teacher	137	4%	60%		36%			<1%
Ties theory to practice as it applies in the classroom								
University supervisor	36	33%	22%		42%		3%	
Classroom supervisor	215	27%	29%	<1%	43%	<1%	<1%	<1%
Student teacher	134	26%	34%	3%	35%	<1%	2%	<1%

(Table continues)

	n	Roles						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
		University	Classroom	Other	1&2	1&3	2&3	1&2&3
Encourages the student teacher to adjust to, value, and attempt various teaching styles and strategies								
University supervisor	36	19%	22%		55%			3%
Classroom supervisor	219	9%	32%		58%		<1%	<1%
Student teacher	136	10%	41%	<1%	54%		<1%	<1%
Helps the student teacher understand how children learn								
University supervisor	36	11%	31%	3%	50%	3%	3%	
Classroom supervisor	217	8%	30%	3%	52%		3%	4%
Student teacher	136	4%	49%	6%	33%		4%	5%

(Table continues)

	n	Roles						
		1 University	2 Classroom	3 Other	4 1&2	5 1&3	6 2&3	7 1&2&3
Helps the student teacher think about the work of effective instruction								
University supervisor	34	18%	32%		47%		3%	
Classroom supervisor	218	11%	33%	<1%	53%		<1%	2%
Student teacher	137	9%	55%	<1%	31%		1%	2%
Supports the classroom teacher in developing a healthy working relationship with the student teacher								
University supervisor	36	83%			3%	8%	3%	3%
Classroom supervisor	218	80%	7%	<1%	7%	6%	<1%	
Student teacher	137	64%	17%	4%	4%	12%		

(Table continues)

	n	Roles						
		1 University	2 Classroom	3 Other	4 1&2	5 1&3	6 2&3	7 1&2&3
Assists the student teacher in writing and following lesson plans								
University supervisor	36	6%	67%	3%	22%		3%	
Classroom supervisor	219	9%	45%	<1%	44%		<1%	<1%
Student teacher	137	4%	66%	<1%	25%	<1%	2%	<1%
Makes the final decision that a student teacher should be removed from the setting								
University supervisor	36	47%		8%	28%	3%		14%
Classroom supervisor	218	18%	16%	2%	60%	<1%	<1%	5%
Student teacher	137	21%	26%	2%	41%		<1%	9%

(Table continues)

	n	Roles						
		1 University	2 Classroom	3 Other	4 1&2	5 1&3	6 2&3	7 1&2&3
Helps the student teacher decide what is important to teach								
University supervisor	36	8%	62%	5%	22%		3%	
Classroom supervisor	217	2%	80%	<1%	16%		<1%	1%
Student teacher	137	3%	77%	1%	12%	<1%	6%	

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